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# **Caught in the conundrum: neoliberalism and education in post-conflict Northern Ireland: Exploring Shared Education**

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## **Abstract**

*Northern Ireland (NI) is emerging from a violent period in its troubled history and remains a society characterized by segregation between its two main communities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in education, where for the most part Catholic and Protestant pupils are educated separately. During the last 30 years there has been a twofold pressure placed on the education system in NI - at one level to respond to intergroup tensions by promoting reconciliation, and at another, to deal with national policy demands derived from a global neo-liberalist economic agenda. With reference to current efforts to promote shared education between separate schools, we explore the uneasy dynamic between a school-based reconciliation programme in a transitioning society and system-wide values that are driven by neo-liberalism and its organizational manifestation - new managerialism. We argue that whilst the former seeks to promote social democratic ideals in education that can have a potentially transformative effect at societal level, neoliberal priorities have the potential to both subvert shared education and also to embed it.*

**Keywords:** Education in divided societies; shared education; reconciliation; neoliberalism; managerialism; Northern Ireland

## **Context: Education in Northern Ireland and the legacy of the conflict**

Like other parts of the world that have experienced serious inter-ethnic conflicts, the NI education system remains divided. With a relatively small population of 1.8 million and approximately 390,000 children of age 0-16 years (NISRA, 2012), government figures show that 93% of children in primary (age 4-11) and post-primary (age 11-18) schools attend either largely Catholic schools (Maintained) or schools that are mainly attended by Protestant children (Controlled). Only 6.9% of NI children attend integrated schools (Borooah and Knox, 2013) that proactively seek to educate children together by creating a balance of 40% of Catholics and Protestants, and 20% of those from other faiths and none.

The role that education plays in post-conflict societies in addressing such issues is complex (Tebbe, 2007) not least concerning the capacity of the system to contribute to mitigating conflict towards sustainable peace. In NI, attempts have involved trying to address the structural causes of violence by not only removing barriers to educational inequality and improving educational and employment opportunities for young people but also by developing educational content, structures, and processes of delivery that promote tolerance and reconciliation. Thus, as part of macro-level strategies to tackle these problems, education has been the target of reforms that are designed to reduce inequality and promote social cohesion. In this paper we explore 'shared education' - an intervention that has gained traction in recent years and is now a central plank in the NI Executive's mainstreaming agenda to promote more harmonious group relations through schools. Understanding the impact of shared education and its potential requires an analysis of the educational landscape that not only locates NI schools in a particular historical and political context, but also accepts that as part of the UK, the NI education system has been hugely influenced by national and global debates regarding the future of education in a globalised world.

## **New managerialism and neo liberalism- the new political consensus**

The election of the Thatcher administration in 1979 heralded a new era of public sector reform in the UK. The post-war consensus, which had advocated policies underpinned by Keynesian economics, welfarism and 'big government' had been shown to have 'failed' as the country

was grappling with extensive strike action, high inflation and high unemployment. In this context of economic instability, New Right ideology, which promoted the benefits of a small state, individual freedom and arms-length accountability, intuitively appealed to Conservative politicians anxious to create a leaner 'hollowed out' state that afforded individuals the space to pursue their own self-interest. Under Thatcher's leadership, the public sector was branded inefficient and wasteful, whilst private sector management practices were hailed as inherently superior and framed as an infinitely more rational way to manage (Hughes, 2012). Despite the deeply held convictions of the Thatcher Government however, it was not until the late 1980s that the reform agenda began to trickle down to public services. Described by Le Grand (2002: 2) as 'a major offensive against the bureaucratic structures of welfare provision' and Glennerster (1991) as the most significant break in the incrementalist tradition of social policy since 1944, the legislation introduced in the years 1988-1990 fundamentally reshaped British public policy. The state, both central and local, was significantly weakened and replaced by a more pluralist system of provision dominated by internal or quasi markets.

By the late 1980s, the Conservative government turned its attention to education. The 1988 Education Reform Act (on which the 1989 Education Reform [Northern Ireland] Order was closely modelled) offered a legislative basis to profoundly reorganise the system of education across the UK. The changes were expansive in their intention and transformative in their scope and effect, as McClure (1991) explains:

The impetus to a general reform was reinforced by a strain of Conservative thinking which sought to reduce the dominant role of local authorities in education and to increase the influence of the consumers – the parents and children -- by introducing market principles into the schools system. [32]

Education was reformed principally by managerialism's central revolutionising force which was to create an educational marketplace. This manifested in several key areas. Firstly, schools were to be accountable to their communities (parents) through new forms of school governance. Echoing the organisational structures of a private business, school governing bodies were now legally responsible and accountable for the running of schools and parents were to be more fully represented than before. Secondly, schools were opened up to competition through a reworking of the system of grant aid. Thus, instead of attracting a 'block grant', they were to be funded according to a formula which included the number of pupils at the school. Schools had to compete for pupils in a quasi-market place to guarantee their

survival. Parents were to choose the school that best suited their child and the ensuing logic was that the 'good' school would thrive and weaker schools would inevitably close (Ranson, 1993). Finally, there was an explicit focus on raising academic standards. Schools were to be judged on the attainment of pupils in national examinations, and league tables of performance were to be published by the Department of Education and made available to consumers in a commitment to transparency and accountability (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Although since 2001 the Department of Education in NI no longer publishes school league tables, this practice has been sustained by local and national newspapers, which, at regular intervals in the year, publish tables of school performance offering a basis on which 'customers' (parents and students) can make an 'informed choice'. It is this dual commitment to consumer choice and performativity that is arguably at the center of the managerialist endeavour:

Markets depend above all on the existence of a range of products among which sovereign customers make choices. Put simply the power of consumers over producers should drive out substandard provision and raise the overall quality of supply ; As customers are attracted to top quality products, inferior supplies either improve their product or go out of business; in either case average quality rises. The ERA aims to use these same principles to improve the quality of schooling. [Miliband, 1991: 4]

Whilst in the early 1990s these policies were deemed radical and highly divisive, they are now recognized as 'part of the common-sense furniture of everyday life, and generally accepted as given by the Right and Left alike' (Hickel, 2012: 1). Indeed, and perhaps in an illustration of Hickel's argument, the election of the New Labour Government in 1997 did little (despite some expectation) to dismantle the work undertaken by successive Conservative Governments. Although there might have been a recognised disjuncture between the New Labour's emphasis on social justice and social democracy and the prevailing concern with performativity, accountability and competition, the Labour administration nonetheless from 'neoliberal roots embrace[d] the marketising reforms of the outgoing administration' (Fergusson, 2000: 202). The Conservative-led coalition in 2010 and the Conservative administration which was elected in 2015 have also, predictably, vigorously pursued a managerialist agenda, persuasively arguing that there is no alternative in the current economically austere times (Lingard and Sellar 2012).

The managerialist approach to education has not however attracted universal support, and its fundamental ambitions have inspired academic critique and derision from left-wing politicians

who are keen to stress its negative and somewhat perverse effects. A recurring argument has been that instead of raising standards, the culture of performativity has simply 'redefined the concerns of schools and teachers with the measurable and the short-term at the expense of the less quantifiable and the longer-term' (Gleeson and Husbands, 2003: 502). Yet it is precisely the less quantifiable and the longer term cultural and social responsibilities that are the *raison d'être* of the public organisation, and as Touraine (1984) suggests, these responsibilities become all the more crucial in societies which are permeated by the values of state sponsored marketisation:

Only the state can integrate social actors who are separated by the market, opposed to each other by class relations, atomised by rational individualism. [36]

Evidence suggests that managerialist policies struggle to embrace these broader social obligations and that their existence serves to limit attempts in education to build social cohesion. Gilborn (2006) argues for example that strategies to promote citizenship education in England are deeply compromised by neo-liberal public policies that give emphasis to student performance in 'high-stake tests'. He suggests that citizenship education has become a placebo that offers the illusion of progress in building social cohesion when in reality the standards agenda simply reinforces the extent and depth of institutionalised racism:

The imperative to raise 'standards' in this crude form has led to the increased use of internal selection between different teaching groups and the impact has been particularly negative for Black students, who find themselves disproportionately placed in the lowest groups, facing a restricted curriculum and lower teacher expectations.... Citizenship education is the sugar coated pill meant to demonstrate the seriousness of a system that continues to systematically exclude and fail Black children. In the current political context, however, the concern with citizenship education may yet prove to be a malign factor that actually worsens the situation [6/12]

Although Gilborn and others have critiqued neo liberalism in the GB context, the relationship between neo-liberal principles and social cohesion in the Northern Ireland education system has not yet been subjected to extensive critical analysis. With this in mind, this paper aims to examine critically the shared education programme against competing discourses and values driven by the neo-liberal managerialist agenda.

## **Shared Education**

Evidence regarding the relationship between separate education for Catholics and Protestants and social division is limited (but generally affirmative), and educationalists have long sought to promote more positive inter-group relations in Northern Ireland. Until 2007, the approach was twofold, reflected on the one hand in short-term contact opportunities for pupils in predominantly Catholic and Protestant schools, and on the other, in the promotion of integrated schools which prioritise education of Catholics and Protestants together. In 2007 the Shared Education Programme (SEP) was introduced to 'bridge the gap' between short-term opportunities for contact, and 'full immersion' integrated schools. Informed by contact theory, shared education offers sustained, curriculum-based interaction between pupils attending all school types, aimed at promoting the type of contact likely to reduce prejudice and ultimately contribute to social harmony.

Funded by the international charity Atlantic Philanthropies, SEP was first established as a large scale pilot programme in 12 partnerships based in specialist schools (majoring in ICT, languages, arts, etc). Schools within each partnership were incentivised to collaborate on a cross-community basis to share classes and activities. Until recently (2014), the programme was delivered through three providers: Queen's University; The North Eastern Education and Library Board; and Fermanagh Trust. Recent figures estimate that 150 schools have participated to date, involving 15,000 pupils across Northern Ireland (Knox, 2013). Typical activities undertaken by schools include: year 14 students completing 'A' level subjects in cross-community classes; year 12 students completing GCSE subjects in cross-community classes; and jointly provided and accredited vocational training courses. At the end of 2014, reflecting the success of the initiative and the NI Executive's commitment to it, the Department of Education launched a 'Signature Project' for shared education which replaces the Atlantic Philanthropies project, and represents a step towards sharing becoming an option for all children.

An examination of the implementation of the SEP programme reveals that its success, measured by improved social attitudes amongst participants (Hughes, 2014; Hughes et al., 2015) and the current drive to mainstream sharing in education, is attributable in large part to clever engagement with neo-liberal priorities in education in order to embed a social project. To explain, those involved in the development of SEP and in funding the programme were clearly motivated by reconciliation objectives, however previous research on contact

interventions had shown that schools were unlikely to embrace an initiative that was neither measured, nor likely to directly contribute to meeting accountability targets for school performance. At the time of SEP implementation, a recent review of education in Northern Ireland had stressed the need for greater rationalisation and cost-effective practice, pointing to the inefficiencies of current segregated school structures in the context of falling enrolments and an oversupply of school places (Department of Education, 2006). Furthermore, the Education Order (2006) paved the way for the 'Entitlement Framework', which requires that all schools must provide all pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (target 24) and a minimum number of courses at post-16 (target 27) (Department of Education, 2009). Guidance from the Department of Education suggested that schools should consider a number of approaches to fulfilling targets 24 and 27, including 'co-operation and collaboration with neighbouring schools, FE Colleges or other providers' (Department of Education, 2005: 1.4).

Recognising the pressures faced by schools to meet these accountability targets, SEP was promoted primarily as an opportunity for schools to meet the Department of Education's rationalisation objectives and to offer pupils comprehensive subject choice, whilst also contributing to improved community relations. Although reconciliation aims were certainly never denied – indeed schools could only receive shared education funding if they collaborated on an inter-sectoral basis (Catholic and Protestant schools working together), the 'educational' rationale was foregrounded and reconciliation objectives were presented as second order. The fact that SEP objectives are consistent with policy directives in education undoubtedly helps explain why so many schools agreed to participate in the programme. Previous contact initiatives that were explicitly and singularly focused on community relations had met with a much more ambivalent response, with teachers generally adopting a light touch approach (Hughes and Loader, 2015).

An additional factor that may account for extensive programme uptake relates to the role of teachers and their understanding of their professional commitments. Research by Donnelly (2008) has shown that there is often a degree of resistance to dealing directly with conflict related issues amongst teachers, who, in a public sector culture of accountability and performativity, understand their role in more instrumentalist terms. SEP, in foregrounding educational objectives, engages such teachers without directly challenging them to promote



relationship building between Catholics and Protestants, albeit that in facilitating shared classes they are indeed involved in creating spaces where such relationships can flourish.

The shared space offered by SEP has been a key factor in generating more positive inter-group attitudes amongst participants. Research by Hughes et al (2010) that compared the SEP initiative with other forms of cross-sectoral contact in schools across Northern Ireland, found that the curriculum-based focus of the initiative ensured that the contact experience of participants was generally regular and sustained throughout the school year, and that this was key to positive outcomes including prejudice reduction and more positive behavioural tendencies towards the outgroup. Moreover, some evidence suggests that whilst teachers may have been reluctant participants at the outset, some have now become more comfortable teaching mixed classes (Knox, 2010; Duffy and Gallagher, 2012).

Although research findings are generally positive in respect of reconciliation outcomes, some cautionary notes have also been sounded, and these point to the underlying dissonance between the 'soft' relationship-building objectives of shared education and the competitive, target-driven, qualification-focused norms that are privileged in schools. Drawing on theories of inter-group relations, Hughes and others have argued that unless contact encounters permit exploration of group differences and those contentious factors that contribute to hostile group relationships, then there is a danger that the intervention will not advance reconciliation objectives at the societal level (Hughes, 2014; Dovidio et al., 2003). This is because, in the absence of *group-level* engagement, participants can come to view the individuals they interact with as exceptions to the norms that generally apply to the outgroup, therein failing to challenge the negative *group* stereotypes that can fuel inter-group conflict.

As shared education embeds in Northern Ireland, and as we seek to transfer the learning to other divided jurisdictions, a key challenge is how we begin to reconcile the down-playing of reconciliation priorities to effect maximum participation in the programme, and the need to ensure that there is the kind of genuine engagement with difference that can transform how participants think, act and respond to the other group on a daily basis within and beyond the school setting (Hughes, 2014). Although shared classes facilitate enhanced curriculum choice, and more positive social attitudes towards other participants are a welcome 'byproduct', there is little enthusiasm for the type of deep engagement with difference that can engender long term social transformation. This is unsurprising, given that there is currently no audit of

outcomes associated with the promotion of reconciliation. More worryingly perhaps, recent responses to the new Department of Education Signature Project suggest that the call to greater school collaboration is flawed in the context of a funding system for schools that is based on pupil numbers:

'Why would one school share its best practice with a neighbour if that neighbour might potentially poach its pupils and leave it facing possible closure?' [Avril Hall Callaghan, General Secretary of the Ulster Teachers' Union; see Black, 2015]

Hence, shared education which encourages collaborative relationships between schools to enhance educational and social outcomes for all pupils, is inconsistent with an education system where competition is seen as a healthy driver of standards, and the achievement of 'market share' (and therein resources) for one schools is enhanced by its ability to 'outperform' neighbouring schools or offer a unique ethos.

This issue is reflected in tensions that have arisen between collaborating schools, where schools are representative of the grammar and secondary sectors and where schools are associated with different faith perspectives (Controlled, Maintained and Integrated). During fieldwork undertaken by one of the authors to examine the impact of shared education, it was reported by a number of school principals that grammar schools can be reluctant to enroll secondary school pupils for high stakes examinations in their school as this might 'dilute' their results profile and lower their ranking (therein potentially 'costing' them on intake). The 'solution' of enrolling pupils for examinations in their own school has had the negative effect of stigmatising the secondary school pupil and has on occasions led to secondary school pupils dropping 'shared' subjects offered by collaborating grammar schools. Similarly, one principal of a controlled (mainly Protestant) school reported that when his decision to consider transforming to integrated status became known locally, the local Catholic school principal felt betrayed and collaborative relations between the two schools became strained. The concern was that Catholic parents might then opt to send their children to the integrated schools, thereby potentially threatening pupil numbers at the Catholic School.

## **Conclusion**

Investment in shared education, and the current drive to mainstream it, offers a hope that social democratic principles are core to the education system of Northern Ireland. However, as

outlined here, countervailing neo-liberal forces have the potential to limit the impact of the initiative by constraining the delivery of reconciliation objectives and by privileging inter-school performativity and competition. The risk moving forward is that the original intention of the shared education programme is subverted, such that the drive for educational outcome, measured by exam performance, relegates reconciliation to little more than a box ticked.

Some recent developments offer grounds for optimism. The Shared Education Signature Project supported through the Department of Education, assesses each applicant according to stage of development on a shared education continuum. Developed by the NI Teaching Inspectorate, this continuum is then used by the Department of Education to measure progress on key criteria for effectiveness, including ‘dealing with difference’. Academics have also been employed to offer an overall assessment of the initiative that explores the extent to which reconciliation targets, such as prejudice reduction, trust-building and more positive social attitudes have been achieved. The same research will examine a number of shared education partnerships to explore in more detail the enablers and barriers to shared education. Perhaps more significantly, a Shared Education Bill and Policy Framework have been drafted by the Department of Education and will be tabled in the coming months. These, coupled with a framework for ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared for delivering shared education,<sup>1</sup> create a framework for shared education that is clearly in line with the mainstreaming commitment outlined in the Programme for Government. Unlike previous community relations interventions, which were presented as ‘add-ons’ to the real business of education, and responded to accordingly, developments in shared education suggest that relationship-building is genuinely a core value that all schools will be expected to embrace.

Ironically, the longer term effectiveness of shared education, and its contribution to societal change, may be dependent on the values most closely associated with new managerialism. The impetus for measurement – a core neo-liberal priority, might be the driver that both engages schools and commits them to moving beyond the facilitation of superficial engagement between children and young people such that real issues of difference are challenged.

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